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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the use of language in a social service context using microethnographic research techniques is described. The study examined a single interaction between a welfare caseworker and a client as they address the client's employment and educational options. The interaction was videotaped and a segment of just over a minute was analyzed in the context of theory concerning face-to-face communication and looking specifically at the relationships between linguistic, non-verbal, and proxemic cues in the exchange. Results indicate significant differences in the way each participant uses hands and arms in communication, patterns in the caseworker's handling of documents, a shift in caseworker role during the client's extended turn at talk, and use of a range of communication strategies by both participants. It is concluded that microethnographic techniques can illuminate the complex processes involved in communication. Contains 12 references. (MSE)

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Charting New Directions: Of Communication in a Social Service Setting

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Charting New Directions: Of Communication in a Social Service Setting

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The use of microethnography can provide valuable insights into the way communication activities are structured and the degree to which they are successful. As part of a research agenda, microethnographic analysis allows for a close look at the relationship among linguistic, non-verbal, and proxemic cues exchanged by participants. This paper uses such an analysis in examining the interaction between a welfare caseworker and a client as they address the client's employment and educational options. Implications are discussed regarding the creation and maintenance of participants social roles as exemplified by their communicational behavior.

Research utilizing the approaches of ethnographic microanalysis has as one of its primary components the audiovisual recording of participants in naturalistic settings engaged in activities considered routine. A central question for researchers in this orientation concerns the ways in which communicative interaction is achieved with a particular focus on the integration of verbal and non-verbal modes of expression. In a sense, the how of communicational activity takes precedence over the what of linguistic content. Erickson (1992a) provides an overview of the intellectual traditions that have influenced microethnography as well as discussion on key areas of data collection and analysis. Microanalysis has been shown to be an effective manner of examining communication behaviors in educational settings (Erickson and Shultz,1982; McDermott and Gospodinoff, 1979) as researchers are able to capture a level of detail that may escape the unaided eye. While the techniques and tools of this approach offer precision, they are not seen as a substitute for other methods of data collection, but rather as part of a comprehensive research agenda.

This paper provides a microethnographic perspective on the communicational activities that transpire between a social service caseworker and a client in a Department of Public Assistance welfare office. For many individuals, access to educational and employment opportunities is frequently contingent on the successful negotiation of various bureaucratic

governmental institutions, and it is important that teachers are aware of the challenges students often face before even entering the classroom. My interest in looking closely at an interaction in the Department of Public Assistance (DPA) stems from an assignment I gave to students in an adult education class in Philadelphia. I asked the group to write about what they felt was wrong with the welfare system and ways in which improvements might be made. In a majority of the essays, people included communication problems with representatives of DPA as a central concern. Previously, I interviewed a number of class participants about their encounters with caseworkers and other welfare department representatives in an attempt to locate specific areas of interaction that were problematic. However, I had no discussion with DPA officials nor did I observe any of the types of interactions students were discussing. This paper details an attempt to look closely at the communicative behaviors of two individuals as they negotiate an interview that is a standard component of the Department s processing of welfare clients.

In analyzing the interaction between caseworker and client, I would like to consider three general theoretical propositions regarding communication in face-to-face settings. The first is the integration of speaker/listener roles (Goffman,1963; Erickson and Shultz, 1982; Erickson, 1986) which emphasizes the mutual attention and resulting responses humans are continuously involved in when speaking to one another. Rather than viewing participants as fulfilling discrete functions at different points in a conversation, this unified perspective considers behaviors simultaneously as a way of accounting for communicative achievement. Secondly, I will focus on the redundancy of various prosodic and non-verbal modes as integral factors in conveying meaning and structuring the interactional environment (Gumperz, 1982; Erickson, 1992). What work is being done? What messages are sent ? The question of how a sequence of utterances is organized so as to produce a conversation in which not only is something talked about, but a range of interactional activities is also accomplished (West and Zimmerman 1982: 519) will be considered throughout the analysis. The assertion that in such apparently unremarkable behaviors...lies orderliness (p.520), calls for an effort to describe *how* this actually occurs. Finally, I would like to look at the participants use of resources available in the immediate environment and the ways this contributes to the roles they play in the interaction. In addition to the theoretical background and the video recording of interaction , I will draw on my conversations with the caseworker regarding DPA regulations and processes as well as her explanation of various official forms.

Before proceeding to a close analysis of the interaction, I would like to provide a brief overview of the methods used in a microethnographic approach and further background on my data collection procedure. A basic underpinning of the research is that communication can be more fully examined when all modes of interactional activity are considered. One of the

initial challenges in this type of work is to shift attention away from the verbal exchanges among participants to a much more integrated perspective that focuses equally on the paralinguistic, proxemic, and kinesic elements of interaction. If we accept that the verbal component provides only part of the overall meaning in communicational activities, it seems reasonable that we would want to look closely at those elements that play an equal or greater role in directing interactional sensibilities.

The use of video recording is a fundamental tool in microethnography as it provides an opportunity not only for repeated viewing, but also speed alterations which allows for still-shot frame analysis of the interaction. There are several important guidelines in shooting footage that bear directly on the quality of analysis that can be done. Erickson and Wilson (1982) argue for the use of a stationary, wide angle shot that captures participants in a single frame. The objective is to record the naturally occurring shape and sequence of the action as it unfold(s) across real time (p.43) as opposed to documentary model filming characterized by varied angles, close-ups, and panning. A complete, unedited picture is most desirable as one of the main goals is to be able to observe the simultaneous interactional work of participants. The use of video-recording greatly enhances the researcher s ability to consider the full catalogue of communicational devices humans employ and to pay close attention to those instances in which propositional content is being conveyed most clearly through nonverbal channels. Video provides detail that is simply unavailable through traditional audio methods and, while it may not be necessary for every step of the research process, the selective use of this procedure adds significantly to the type of analysis that might be done.

In order to film the interaction between the caseworker and client, I first received approval from the Executive Director of DPA, the District Administrator, and the caseworker. The caseworker then explained the project to clients and asked if they would be willing to participate. If a client agreed to this initial request, I would provide details of the project and a written agreement which all three parties signed. The understanding was that the client's identity would remain confidential; that, if at any point during or after the filming the client changed his/her mind about participating the footage would be discarded; and finally, that any client who wished to have a copy of the tape would be provided with one. Other than negotiating this agreement, my interaction with the clients was minimal, however I did have several conversations with the caseworker regarding various technical issues that arose during the meetings.

Setting and Interactional Analysis

The meeting between the caseworker and the client is part of the Employment Training Program (ETP) under New Directions, a state-wide initiative aimed at encouraging educational and employment opportunities

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to citizens on public assistance. Beyond their regular caseworker who addresses issues such as cash grants, food stamps, and medical assistance, welfare recipients are assigned to a special ETP worker who focuses specifically on the client's goals related to job training, classes, and actual job leads. The ETP worker is responsible for coordinating the client's needs with the particular service provider or program in which the client is involved. This might include allocations for books and materials, transportation costs, allowances for child care, any number of what are termed supportive services by the DPA. The state may not be involved in the direct delivery of services, but it is the primary resource for clients enrolled in these programs. Allocations are sometimes delivered directly to the program in which the client is participating, or they are added to the regular stipend the client receives as part of public assistance.

The segment taped for this project was the first meeting between the client and the ETP counselor. An overview of the major segments of the interaction is provided in Figure 1. The reasons for the meeting include establishing client's experience and goals, providing information about the program, and coordinating efforts between the state and the agency in which the client is currently enrolled. Specifically, questions of transportation cost reimbursement, attendance verification procedures, and a one time clothing allowance are discussed during the interview.

In deciding which portion of the tape I would give the closest analysis, I used Sacks notion of beginning with simple observations (West and Zimmerman, 1982) as a guide. However, where Sacks is concerned with the words used by conversational partners, the mode that initially caught my attention was not the *verbal* interaction of participants, but rather the physical gestures; specifically, the significant increase in one distinct stretch of the tape of hand and arm movements by the male client. There was no other point in the meeting that contained anything close to the amount of movement represented here. This was the beginning of my simple observation and also, I quickly realized, the end. The minute and six seconds I focused on is far from simple. A remarkable number of events, both interactional and referential, combine to produce a complexly intertwined piece of conversation.

The segment I have analyzed begins at 3:55 and lasts until 5:01 (see Figure 2) in an interview which totaled approximately fourteen minutes. Earlier on, at 1:37, the caseworker asks about the client's employment history, inquiring as to the last place he worked. At 1:45 he responds, *The last place I worked- I worked in a..I worked downtown at a..15th and JFK, a restaurant called Au Bon Pain. I was a baker.* He mentions that he worked there for *about four months* . At 3:55 the caseworker re-introduces this topic in an effort to see whether this is an area the client might pursue in his search for employment. The client responds very clearly that he is not interested in this as a work option [line 5], and it is within this response that he begins the hand and arm movements. In focusing on this behavior I want to con-

sider body language not in the dumb sense of the word, but the way people are framing what they re saying with their bodies (Erickson, lecture, 3/20/96) . I would describe the client's answer as containing three thematic components:

1.) Reasons why he had the baking job. Lines 5-7.
2.) Self-definition and work preferences. Lines 10-11.
3.) Reasons for disliking the baking job. Lines 14-22.

While relating all of this his hands and arms are in a state of near-constant motion. There is a clear sense that a change of context is in progress (Erickson and Shultz, 1981). The questions for me became: What is the functional work that is being accomplished here? and Why is it happening at this particular point in the interview? I think that a brief review of the encounter up until this point is helpful. Through a series of primarily closed-ended questions that the client has answered, the following has been established about him within 3.5 minutes. The client:

-is living in a homeless shelter worked in a bakery for four months
-has been laid off from a job

-suffers from depression has not graduated from high school
-needs to work rather than pursue a G.E.D

Two points from Goffman s Footing framework (1981) seem particularly relevant here. In providing a set of considerations in which to analyze human interaction he states:

> Participant s alignment, or set, or stance, or posture, or projected self is somehow at issue.

and that,

> A continuum must be considered, from gross changes in stance to the most subtle shifts in tone that can be perceived (p.128).

To look at the projected selves the client has been able to express up to this point in the interview is to see a representation of difficult life circumstances, the positioning of a man in the lower realms of societal expectations and achievements. However, with the question that opens up the transcribed minute, the client takes the opportunity to express a great deal about

his preferences for work and to share past work experiences. Within the context of the interview it would have been perfectly reasonable for him to offer a substantially shorter answer than the one he gave. His detailed explanation and the accompanying gesticulations suggest to me that the client was revealing a new identity, one that had not yet been brought to light in the course of the interview.

Non-verbal behavior and use of immediate resources

The minute of interaction shows significant differences in the way each participant makes use of hands and arms in communication. While a graphic representation would show much more dramatic movement by the client, a close look at the tape reveals that the caseworker too, is involved in a great deal of functional work with her hands. A focus on her strategies begins with a comparison of the desk surface immediately in front of each participant. The caseworker's space is filled with a number of folders, forms, pamphlets, and writing instruments, while the client's area is completely bare. In terms of discourse production resources (Erickson, 1992) the caseworker is supplied with a number of remarkably tangible tools which she can use to direct interaction throughout the interview. In addressing the use of written records or proxy systems in which human behavior is embodied, McDermott and Roth (1978) state that the organization of face-to-face interaction can sometimes be shown to reflect a person's orientation to actors and circumstances not immediately present (p.341). Although she has never met the client, the caseworker knows a great deal about him through information contained in the files in front of her and is able to preface questions with this background knowledge. By comparison, all of what the client says is a result of spontaneous verbalizations of past experiences, opinions, and future plans. In addition, the caseworker records many of the client's answers in writing, further constructing his official record. These activities result in the caseworker being in almost constant physical contact with documents and writing instruments throughout the interview. Her hand movements have less variability than the client's, and, while his serve to add emphasis to statements, exclamation points in the air, the caseworker's hands are generally subdued, enacting an official role in their proximity to official documents.

There is a further interesting phenomenon regarding the interaction of participants with documents during the interview. This is a variation of anthropomorphizing in which the piece of paper being held in the caseworker's hand comes to represent the particular topic being discussed. On three separate occasions the client motions directly to a document while referring to *it* as that which it represents. Initially, the client points to the paper as the Homeless Initiative Program- the job training he is involved in. Soon after, the client nods to the papers on the desk, while referring to them as the welfare meaning the benefits he has been receiving. Finally,

the client gestures with his hand to the forms in the caseworker's hand as they now represent baking and very soon after, with another motion, jobs like that. His references do not result from an *actual* switching of papers in the caseworker's grasp; throughout most of his utterances the document she has been holding remains the same. These actions are noteworthy as they illustrate the tremendous symbolic power of documents and their ubiquitous role in the client's interactions with various social institutions.

Interactional roles and responses

The client's extended turn at talk in the transcribed minute causes a shift in the role of the caseworker. Her primary activity of question-asking now becomes one of providing back-channel responses (lines 8, 12, 15, and 20) during the client's narrative. The phrase used most often by the caseworker is *O.K.* which seems to function as both an acknowledgment and a mild affirmation of what the client has just said. The absence of these utterances would almost surely have reduced the amount of explanation by the client. It is interesting to consider how these back-channels are functioning for the caseworker and the possibility that their meaning shifts even as the phrase remains the same. In addition to being an affirmative response the use of O.K. can be seen as a signal by its speaker that the floor is desired. The doubling of the phrase is the most dramatic example as in *O.K. O.K.* which, simply translated, means **Enough**; but the intended function can be the same with the single form of the expression. The caseworker's four back-channeling utterances between lines 10-20 occur immediately after the client states a reason why he doesn't want to be involved in a baking job or jobs like that. His statements are centered around a core theme that these types of jobs do not involve much physical activity and that he would be bored in this environment. I would describe his statements as very similar to one another and having a repetitive quality. In the next section I will take a close look at the client's fifth statement about these jobs and the resulting change in context that occurs between him and the caseworker.

The client's statement in lines 21-22, *I can get bored real quick if I m not doin nothin, you know what I mean?*, is followed, not by a back-channel response from the caseworker, but by a direct question: *Have you been lookin for employment even though you ve been in this program?*. This marks the beginning of a fascinating exchange of contextualization cues (Gumperz, 1982) as both participants physically stake out spaces in which to position their talk. As the caseworker asks the question, she fully extends her right arm and brings her hand down on the desk with a series of four quick taps finally letting it rest, still extended. There is also a significant prosodic feature to her question that distinguishes its function as being, at least partly, an attempt to re-gain the floor from the client's persistent explanation. Her question (line 23) manages to include eighteen syllables in under 3 sec-

onds. Compared to her statement which begins the segment (line 1), in which she utters seventeen syllables in 5.5 seconds, this is a full doubling in her rate of speech.

The question is also noteworthy for the response it elicits from the client. Soon after the caseworker begins uttering the question the client gives a slight head nod, and as the caseworker says the word *you've*, the client begins his answer, *Yes I have...* . I am hesitant to label this exchange an interruption as this term suggests an undue amount of assessment on my part. Agreement on what constitutes interruption is entirely dependent on the immediate context of interaction (Erickson, 1992) precluding an outsider's categorization of it as such. A more objective description would be the observation that there is no other point in the entire interview in which the client speaks during an utterance initiated by the caseworker. In addition to his quickened verbal response, the client also makes use of hand and arm movement. In line 25 the client has fully extended his left arm on the desk-top and points the index finger of his left hand into the air while he explains the ways he has been engaged in searching for employment. It is a striking image of the two participants, arms planted on the table, as they negotiate their roles in this setting. As the client speaks the caseworker gives fewer and less engaged back-channel utterances than during his previous turn, and she hastens his conclusion with an effective, triple combination of cuing. With two quick *mhm*s, a sharp turn of the head, and picking up and focusing on a piece of paper, the caseworker again re-gains the floor. With terrific synchrony, the phase ends as both parties pull back their arms- the caseworker to the next form, the client to his side. Fade to black, and a new frame emerges. The caseworker asks, *Do they issue your carfare in this program?*

Concluding Thoughts

I have tried to look closely at the full range of communicational strategies employed by two participants in a formal setting with particular attention to paralinguistic and non-verbal elements. The degree of intricacy and the sheer number of processes that speaker/listeners engage in is quite remarkable. Far from a clear distinction between speaker and listener, human actors are in a near-constant state of providing and monitoring feedback regarding how communication is proceeding through a dynamic interchange of speaker/hearer roles. The words chosen by a speaker are only one part of a message constructed with the aid of numerous non-verbal guides which are assessed with varying degrees of conscious awareness by the listener. The participants use of their bodies and the caseworker's added manipulation of documents and writing implements serve as highly significant cues in the framing of verbal behavior.

In the case of this interview, as in all interaction, participants are called on to enact some semblance of a social role that serves to direct the form and manner of their communicational activity. In analyzing the tape, I am

impressed by how strictly these roles are defined, and I am led to consider their effects on the perpetuation of those who are asked to play them. What issues of identity become embodied in the structure of formal interviews such as this one, and what limits of agency are reinforced? For example, it would be unthinkable for the client, after answering the caseworker's question about employment history, to then ask, *How long have you been working for DPA?* or *What made you decide on this type of career?* That these questions are *obviously* inappropriate causes me not to dismiss them as irrelevant, but to further investigate what basic premises they have violated. I would like to recall, once again, Sacks notion that in such unremarkable behavior...*lies orderliness* (p.520) for, on the one hand, the interaction between the caseworker and the client is truly unremarkable or routine. However, broadening the scope of Sacks observation, I would ask what type of orderliness is being achieved, and, how is each participant responsible for this?

This paper has focused on interaction in a governmental social service institution and has detailed certain issues specific to that location. I think it is clear, however, that the dynamics of communicational activity illustrated here can be seen across a wide variety of settings. In particular, those working within educational programs, in whatever capacity, might focus on how communication is being attempted as a large part of what is or is not achieved.

Familiarity with the approaches of microethnography may encourage a greater degree of awareness of the minute and complex processes involved in making communication work. As part of a larger research plan, microethnographic analysis can provide an invaluably rich view of how interactions are accomplished.

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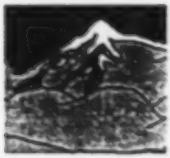
Craig Heim is a masters student in the TESOL program at the University of Pennsylvania. His interests are in sociolinguistics, adult education, and the relationships between educational and social service institutions.



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